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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the "uses of the past" model of personality development, a model in which adult development transforms an individual's history into resources for meeting present demands. The components of the model are delineated in terms of how: (1) neither the past nor the present is fixed in its effects or its contribution to present adaptation; (2) experiences of the past and present interact; and (3) the past, as it expands over time, allows new combinations and capacities for later life changes. Adulthood is defined not as an unchanging stage, but as a series of ongoing states that recruit and combine material from the past for present effective functioning. To illustrate the model, longitudinal data from two inter-generational studies are presented in which subjects' past modes of responding are correlated with adult adaptation according to relevance rather than recency. Findings from the studies are discussed, and future research of and uses for the model are suggested. (NRB)

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USES OF THE PAST: AN ADULT-CENTRIC MODEL OF
PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

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Uses of the past: An adult-centric model of personality development

Harvey Peskin and Norman Livson

Abstract

In the "uses of the past" formulation, adult development transforms the individual's particular history into a well of resources to be drawn from to meet the ever-changing demands of the present. By this view, neither past nor present — neither childhood nor adolescence nor any era of adulthood — is fixed in its effects or of higher priority in its contribution to present adaptation. Rather, experiences of the past and present interact in ways that blur the usual chain of cause-and-effect. The expanding past brings with it the potential for new combinations and emerging capacities for later life changes. Conceptually, we are then dealing not with a single, once-and-for-all adulthood, but rather with ongoing states of adulthood that differentially recruit and actively combine material from the past for present effective functioning. Seen from the "uses of the past" perspective, Brim's "mythical plateau of adulthood" gives way to heuristic alternative models of past-present relationships for the longitudinal researcher. Empirical illustrations from two longitudinal studies are presented.

Introduction

The resources which adults draw upon from their own youth can tell much about the tasks and goals of current psychological adaptation. Changes in such early resources with aging can, then, also inform us about the changing tasks and goals of successive adult eras. We call this perspective an adult-centric one because it emphasizes adult determinants of effective childhood influences. What is prior can be constructed and called upon by what comes after. This model assumes that adults may bypass the recent for the more distant past to make use of latent potentialities that have again become congruent with life goals. In short, overtime relationships may well drop, but then resurge with aging. Empirically, the model requires longitudinal data in which past modes of responding are correlated with adult adaptation according to relevance rather than mere recency.

The samples and data come from the Inter-Generational Studies (IGS) of the Institute of Human Development:

(1) the Guidance Sample (born 1928-31), intensively assessed over adolescence and followed up at ages 30 and 40.

(2) the Oakland Sample (born 1922-24), similarly assessed over adolescence and followed up at ages 37 and 47.

Assessments at all ages were made with the 100-item California Q-Sort, from interviews, tests, etc.

Fig. 1 graphs the number of significant correlations between the adolescent assessments (100 items) and a composite Q-sort measure of Psychological Health for each adult age.

I. Recency or resurgence with age?

Fig. 1 shows that 3 of the 4 subsamples follow the pattern of resurgence with age: later adult psychic health is related more strongly to adolescent behaviors than is earlier adult health. Recency, then, does not primarily account for past influences on adulthood. Only Guidance women show a declining "use" of adolescent behaviors with age.

II. Uses of the past in the "first half of life" — between 30 and 40

For males, the sharply increased use of the past from 30 to 40 suggests that adolescent socialization is targeted to adult goals beyond the early-adult years of marriage and young family — to the age-40 time of "becoming established." By contrast, females show declining use of the past from 30 to 40 which suggests that adolescent socialization prepares resources for the parental function of earlier adulthood rather than the decline of parenting of later adulthood. In short, the pattern of findings in Fig. 1 suggests that uses of the past should follow the classic sex differences of adult aspirations during the "first half of life." The adolescent correlates in Fig. 2 (reduced by cluster-analysis of the Q-sort items) support this suggestion: sex differences in adolescent resources reflect the classic models of the established, instrumental male (age 40) and the empathic, mothering female (age 30).

Fig. 3 shows that women at age 40 who continue to mother a young child draw on many of the same resources as at age 30. But when mothering of the younger child is accomplished, no adolescent resources are drawn upon at age 40. Thus, life stage, not age alone, is crucial.

III. Uses of the past near the "second half of life" — between 37 and 47

Fig. 4 presents the adolescent correlates of Psychological Health at 37 and 47 for males, and Fig. 5 for females. For males nearing midlife at age 47, an inward turn of the self is suggested: men draw on adolescent behaviors bypassed 10 years earlier at age 37 — those which younger men would deem soft and unmasculine.

For women, aging to age 47 brings forth adolescent behaviors of expressive and cognitive freedom, replacing the autonomous resources at age 37.

(Note that nearly 40% of the Oakland women were virtually single parents during the Second World War).

Finally, as Fig. 6 shows, women at 47 whose last-born child is older than 18 — the postparental marker — draw on adolescent resources which suggest that womens' postparental goals are toward individualistic strivings. But women with last-borns still under 18 hardly draw on adolescence at all, suggesting again the ambiguous era and meager preparation for parental decline.

Conclusions

(1) The recovery of the adolescent past seems organized around chronological age for adult males and family stage for adult females.

(2) A theory for the recovery of the past in adult-centric terms will continue to emerge as longitudinal samples are followed into the later life-span. Indeed, one can look ahead to the influences of a "uses of the past" formulation on reconstruction in psychoanalytic theory, since such a formulation may allow a psychodynamic no less than child-centric viewpoints.

(3) A matter for further research is how the present method relates to the recovery of the past through reminiscence, nostalgia and other forms of life review.

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FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF SIGNIFICANT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ADOLESCENT Q-SORT ITEMS (P=100) AND Q-SORT MEASURE OF ADULT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

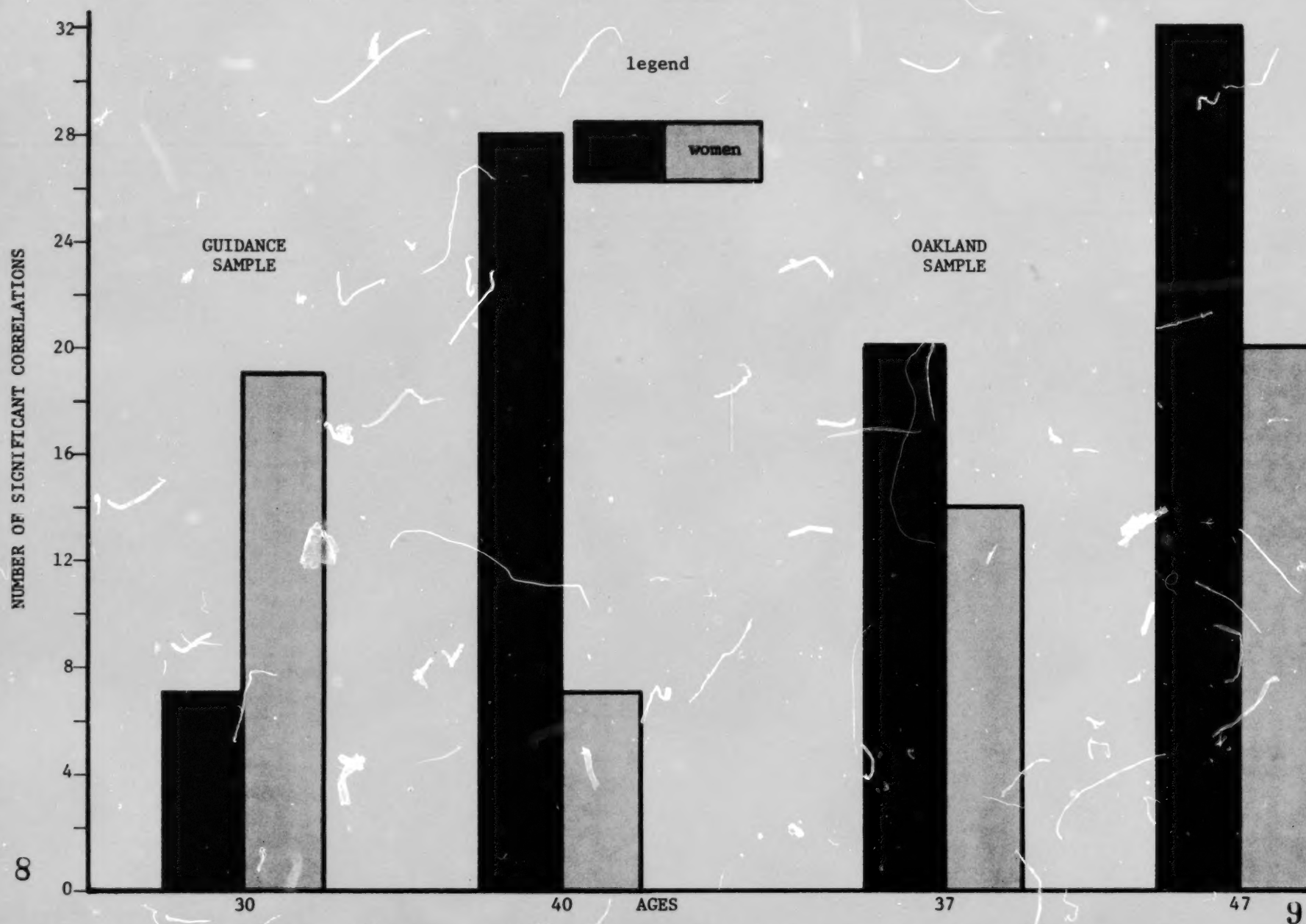


FIGURE 2. CORRELATES OF SIGNIFICANT ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS (Q-SORT CLUSTERS) AND ADULT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH: WOMEN AT 30 AND MEN AT 40.

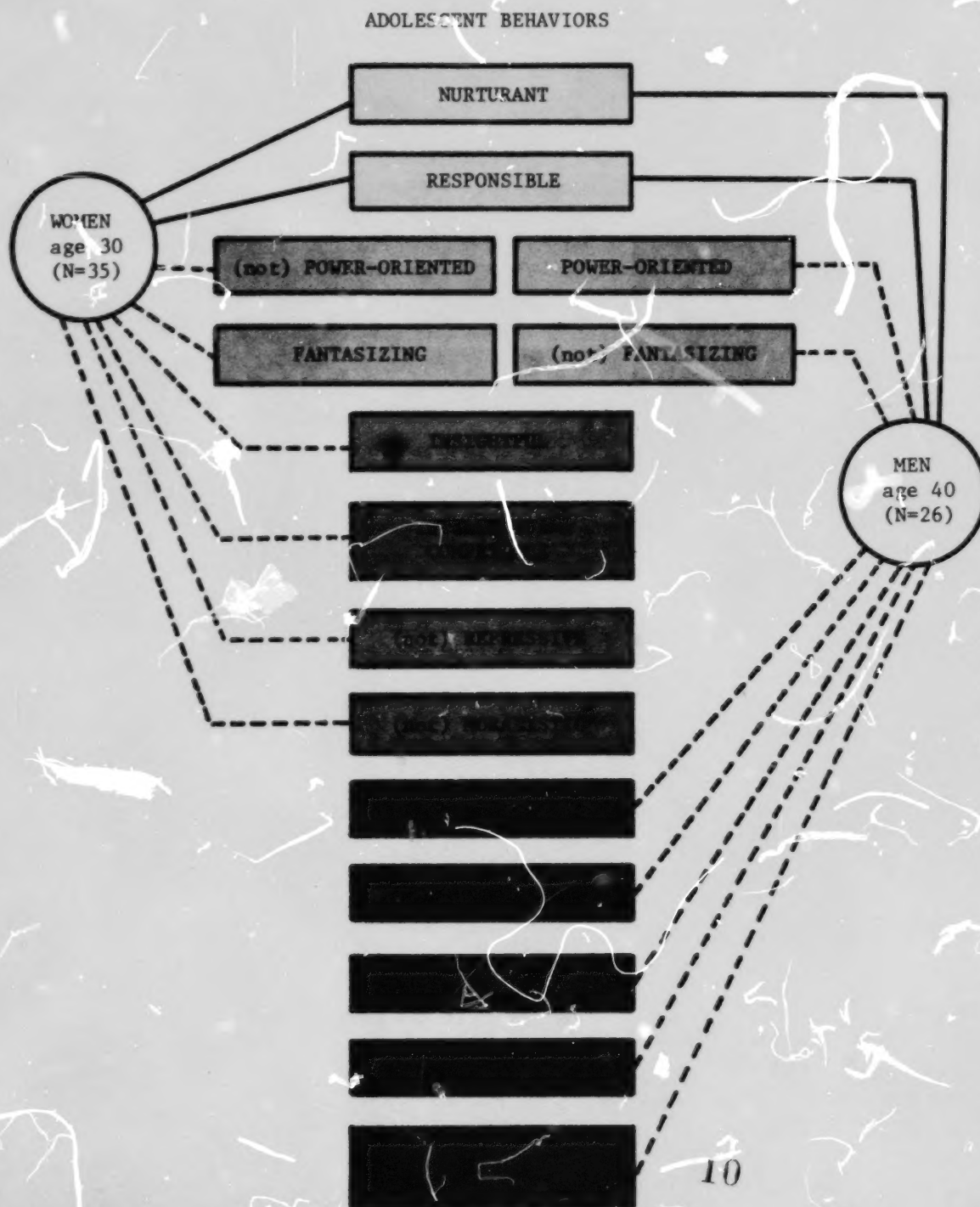


FIGURE 3. CORRELATES OF ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS AND ADULT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH: AGE 40 WOMEN WITH YOUNGER AND OLDER LAST-BORNS

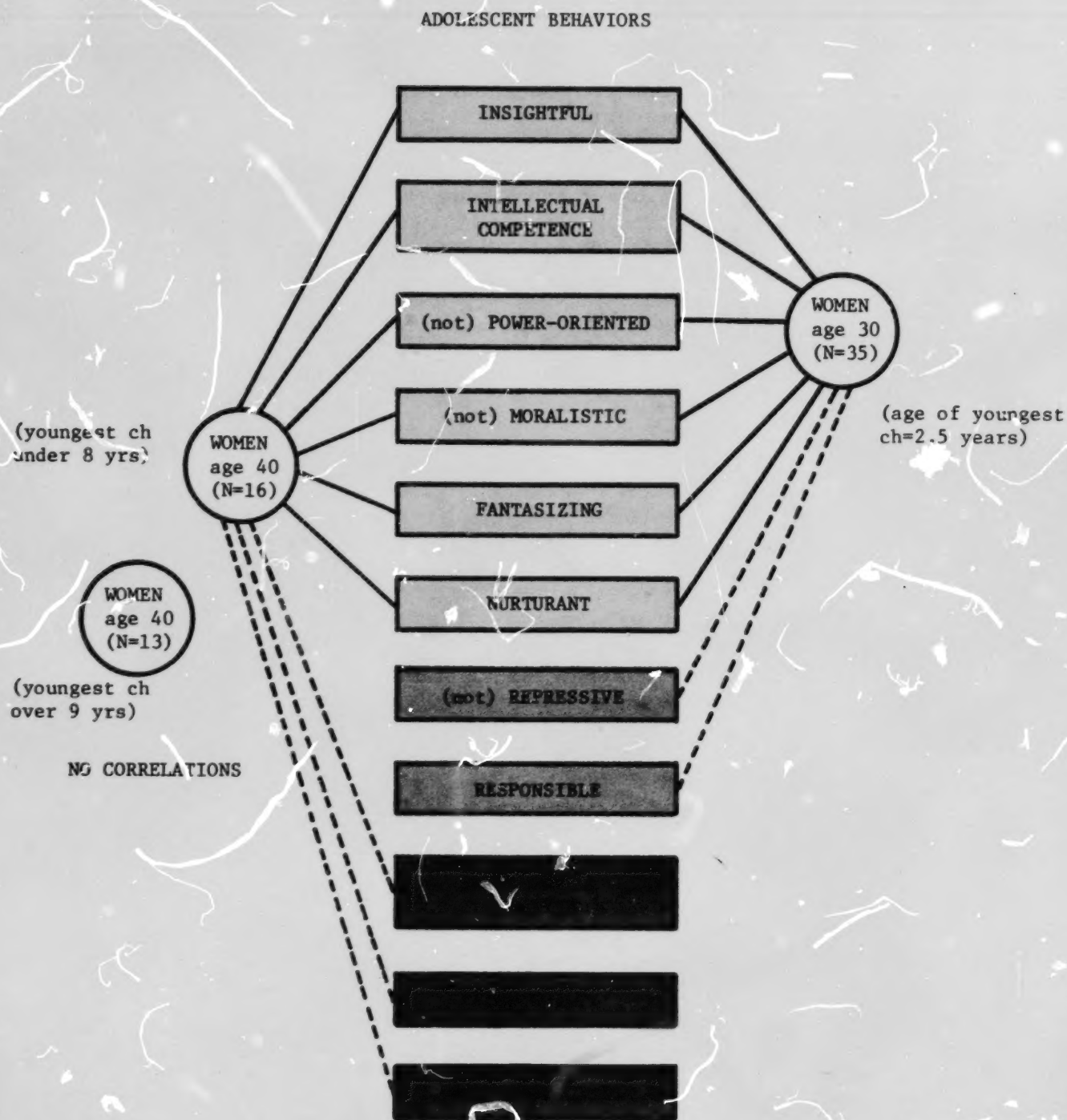


FIGURE 4. CORRELATES OF ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS AND ADULT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH: MEN AT 37 AND 47

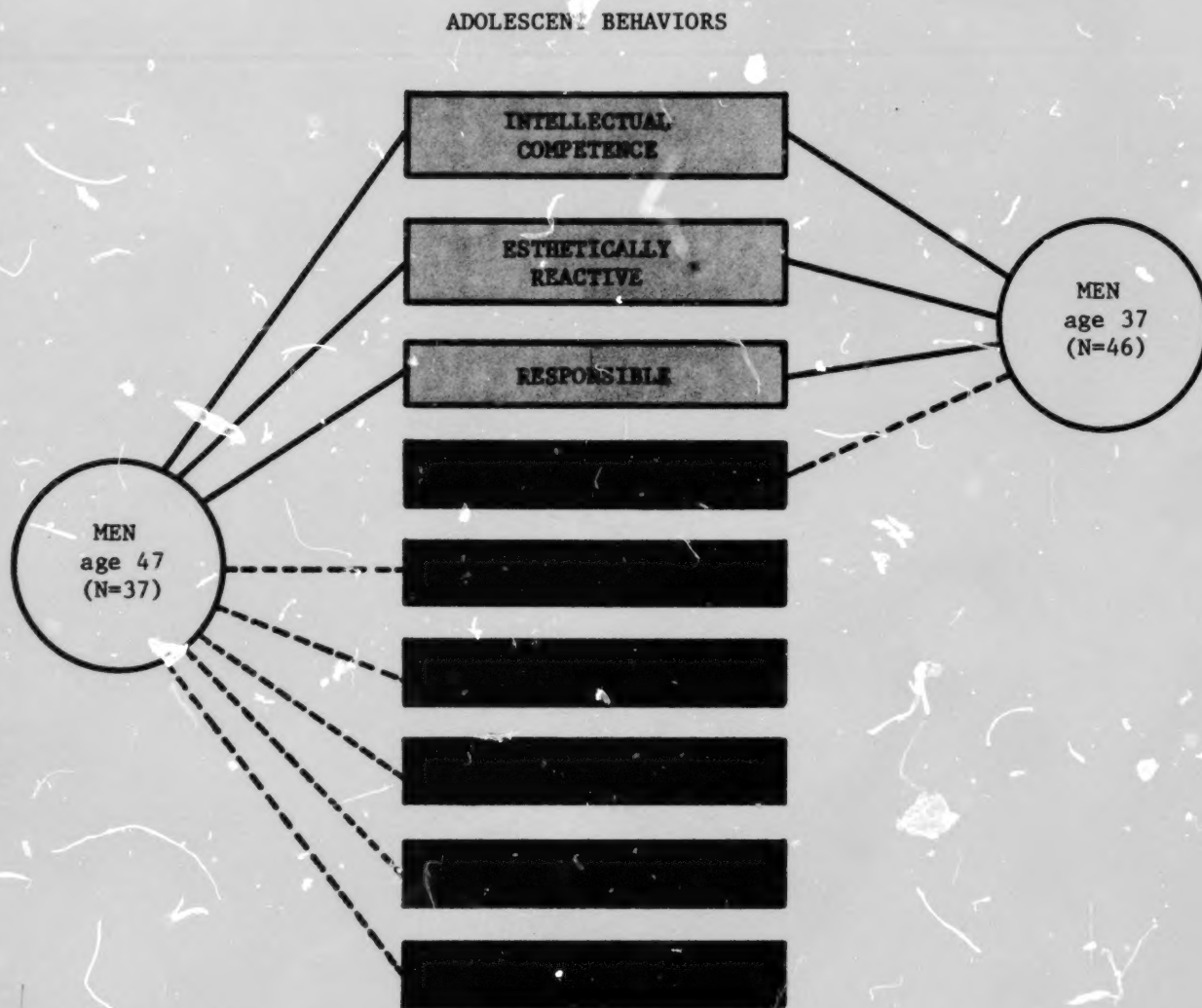


FIGURE 5. CORRELATES OF ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS AND ADULT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH: WOMEN AT 37 AND 47

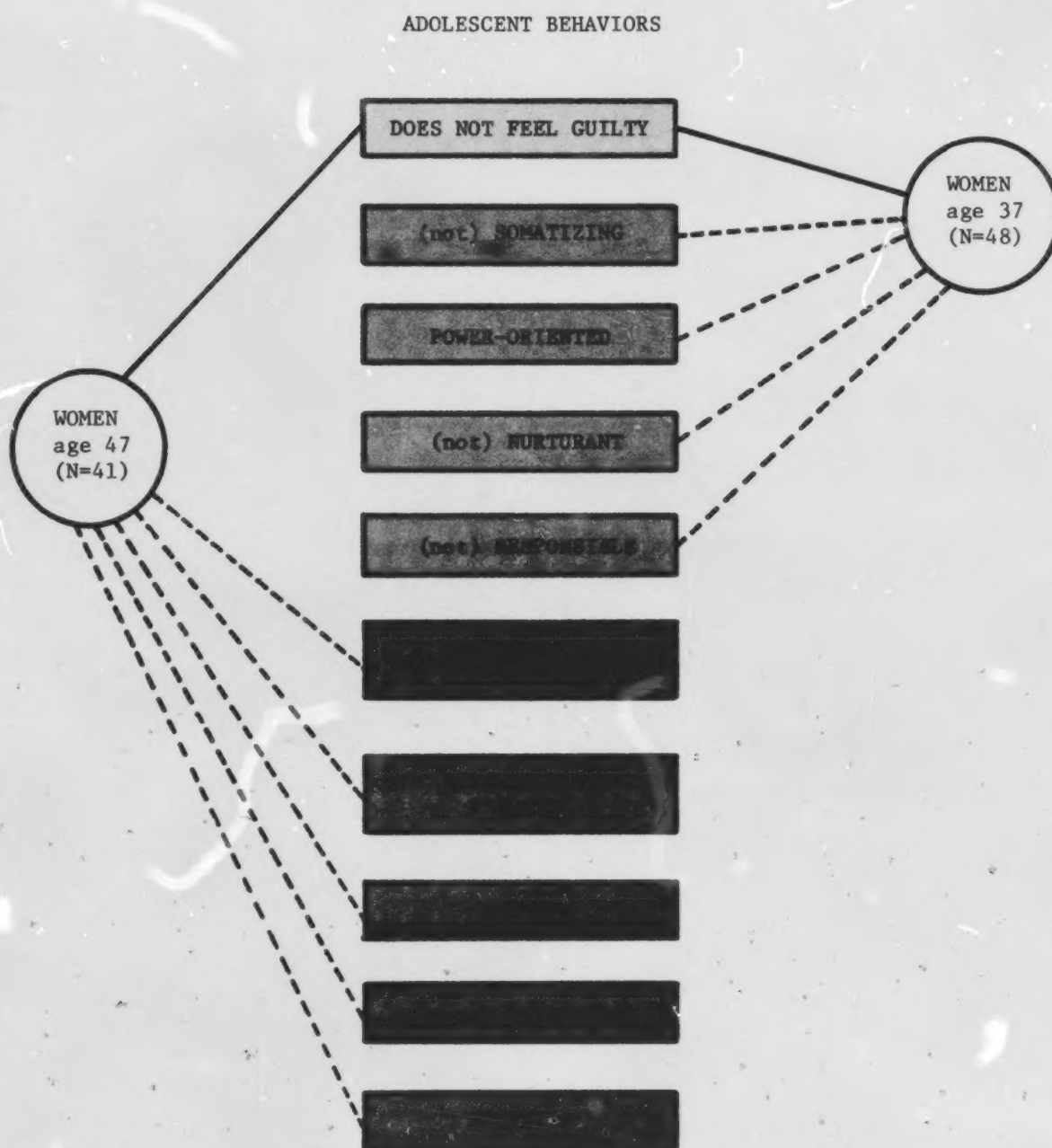


FIGURE 6.

CORRELATES OF ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS AND ADULT PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH: AGE 47 WOMEN WITH YOUNGEST CHILD OLDER AND YOUNGER THAN 18

